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OPINION

By Kate Maltby
The i Paper columnist

The ban on online porn showing choking is doomed to fail

Reaching for a ban is not always the best way to cure a social ill

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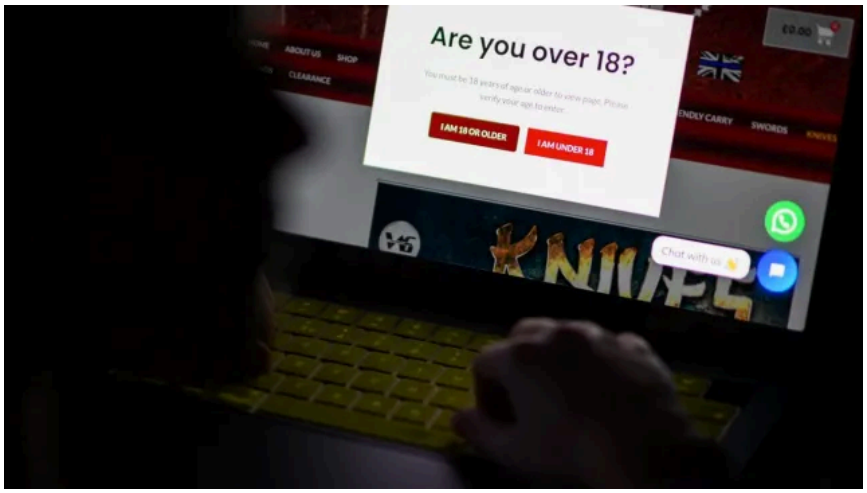

'No government has ever succeeded in changing the sexual behaviour of its citizens by diktat,' writes Kate Maltby

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We can trace the history of moral panics in any society by the history of laws brought in to outlaw sexual behaviour. No government has ever succeeded in changing the sexual behaviour of its citizens by diktat. Yet the Labour government seems to believe it can do just that. Yesterday it confirmed the latest stage of its battle against online pornography, a plan to criminalise the depiction of strangulation or suffocation. To understand why this is doomed to fail, we only need to look to back to earlier this summer.

In July, millions of pornography users woke up one morning and realised they should have paid attention to politics for the past ten years. The Online Safety Act became law in 2023, but its sharpest impact on British pornography habits only became apparent this summer, with the implementation of provisions which require users of pornographic websites to verify their age and identity.

This was originally a David Cameron project. In a major 2013 speech at the NSPCC, the prime minister had promised to "protect our children and their innocence". Child safety campaigners spent the next decade lobbying Westminster to shape his promise into policy, proposing a series of models that promised to stop children encountering porn online.

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On 25 July, 2025, those theories met the real world. Overnight, anyone logging on to porn websites from a UK IP address found themselves being asked to prove who they were. The immediate response was a massive uptake in downloads for virtual private networks (VPNs), which allow the user to access websites under the cloak of a foreign IP address. One provider, ProtonVPN, reported a 1,800 per cent spike in sign-ups. Anonymous online communities, such as Reddit, became hotbeds of porn users seeking advice on the best VPNs for this very purpose, most of them fulminating that the law had caught them unawares.

Pornography now permeates our world – no reasonable person should pretend that its saturation of our society is healthy. A recent report by England's Children's Commissioner, the smart and principled Rachel de Souza, found that 27 per cent of children had encountered pornography online before the age of 11. Many (59 per cent) had stumbled across it accidentally, up from 38 per cent two years ago. We know that human sexuality is shaped by early sexual experience. Study after study shows that children replicate the behaviours they see in pornography, and it can take a lifetime to decouple early fetishes from healthy intimacy.

This is why the Government remains determined to clamp down further on British users' access to pornography. And hence yesterday's amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill to outlaw porn which depicts suffocation and strangulation. But well intentioned as it is, this move is likely to be every bit as easy to side-step as the provisions of the Online Safety Act. If you've already downloaded a VPN for your normal porn, it'll work for anything else.

The depiction of extreme violence is already illegal. It's all well and good to add an extra clause explicitly targeting the depiction of strangulation, but there's no evidence that such new amendments to the law are any more likely to be enforced than the existing statutes. But the rise of choking as a mainstream sexual practise has been a matter of particular concern amongst feminists for some time – and for good reason. Strangulation cases are on the rise, which is why the government also created the standalone offences of non-fatal strangulation or suffocation under the Domestic Abuse Act of 2021. There were 23,817 recorded incidents in 2022-23, with 81 per cent of the victims being women. A series of landmark studies have established that women who regularly participate in "consensual" strangulation show elevated levels of S100B, a marker of brain damage. However deep one's fetishes run, surely there are safer ways to get your kicks.

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Many feminists blame porn. The theory is that the more popular such violent porn becomes, the more men come to demand such practises in real life, and women feel pressured to comply. (This is why the question of "consent" gets

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thorny; are you consenting if your husband says he'll leave you if he can't strangle you in bed?) This February, Tory peer Baroness Bertin proposed a ban on the depiction of such acts when she published her government-commissioned report into online pornography, citing a US study showing that 27 per cent of female undergraduates had reported being choked during "their most recent sexual event". Her report has been the driving force behind the government's proposals today.

None of this means, however, that the latest attempt to crack down on a dangerous trend in porn is likely to work any better than every previous attempt. That's even if we can be sure that online porn is behind the very real rise in intimate partner strangulation. Bertin's report does not in fact cite a single academic study which establishes such a link. A headline-catching claim that "boys as young as ten are asking teachers how to choke girls during sex" is described as "anecdotal evidence submitted to this review", with a footnote directing us also to a single BBC interview with a headteacher who blames porn. Choking does not make Pornhub's 2024 list of the most popular search terms in the UK, which remain highly racialised, with the Japanese tradition of "hentai" at the top.

Bertin is right, however, that the porn problem is real. Our young people are being exposed to pornography too early. There's only one way to confront this, and it's the oldest, most difficult method in the book: talk about it.

If boys are genuinely asking teachers how to choke partners during sex, they're doing something rare and vulnerable: offering their teachers an opportunity to put them right. Once they learn that the pornography they've just viewed is illegal, or makes them a criminal, they will be far less willing to confess what they've been viewing to the next responsible adult.

Young children are curious. They will continue to absorb whatever they can find on the computers of the adults around them and the more of those adults who have a VPN permanently switched on in the background, the less relevant mere UK law and its narrow jurisdiction becomes. But healthier conversations about pornography will only happen when young people feel comfortable bringing them to the light. Push inquisitive young people into the darker shadows of online illegality, and they will remain there.

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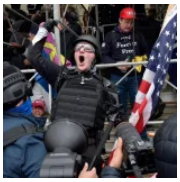

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